Air Force News

353rd air commandos make daring rescue

By Master Sgt. Michael Farris
353rd Special Operations Group Public Affairs

OSAN AIR BASE, Republic of Korea – As freezing rain lashed the base here Feb. 27, an MH-53J Pave Low III crew prepped for a night-training sortie. Commanded by Capt. Paul Pereira, the mission was scheduled to upgrade co-pilot 2nd Lt. Patrick Fronk to aircraft commander. While Fronk never received his upgrade, three Koreans are alive today because of the crew's quick response and the unique abilities of their warbird.

A winter blizzard roared across eastern China, intensified over the Yellow Sea and was pounding South Korea. Visibility was measured in arm-lengths and waist-high ceilings made flying hazardous.

Soupy skies and driving winds would test the resolve of any aviator. It's precisely these circumstances, however, where the Pave Low helicopter flourishes.

About 7 p.m. the Korean Rescue Coordination Center called the 31st Special Operations Squadron. The center requested an emergency evacuation of four Koreans involved in a major vehicle accident on a United Nations-controlled island north of the Han estuary separating North and South Korea. Deteriorating weather limited evacuation options to the MH-53J so the RCC asked the Black Knights to fly the injured to a hospital in Incheon.

U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Val Gempis

An MH-53J Pave Low III helicopter from the 31st Special Operations Squadron hovers over a landing zone during a training mission near Osan Air Base, Republic of Korea. The mission of the 31st SOS is to conduct unconventional warfare and special operations in support of U.S. Pacific Command commander in chief and the National Command Authorities. They execute low-level penetration of hostile areas to infiltrate, exfiltrate, and resupply U.S. and allied special operations forces.

"This was perfectly unfamiliar territory for us," explained Pereira. "Our training typically doesn't send us that far north. Just before we took off we got a marginal weather report from an airborne MC-130P Shadow from the 17th SOS. We were more excited than nervous–anxious to put our training to use."

Crammed with some of the most exotic space-age navigational aids in the Air Force inventory, the MH-53J is so technologically advanced it takes six crewmen to fly it. Three scanners in the back cabin aid the pilots and flight engineer in the cockpit to maneuver the 21-ton behemoth when it flies in the low-level environment. Its terrain-following, terrain-avoidance radar and forward-looking infrared and precision navigation system permit nighttime and poor weather infiltration of Special Forces units with pin-point accuracy.

For an hour and a half, the crew "paved" north through the maelstrom using their radar. With eyes on instruments 90 percent of the time, the pilots compared terrain features on a paper map with radar readings on the console. Staff Sgt. Dave Stepanek, flight engineer, provided navigation updates, airspeed and altitude calls and kept the helo on course. In the cabin, Maj. (Dr.) J.D. Bailey and two medical technicians prepped equipment and litter configuration for the patients.

Pitching and rolling at 150 mph and 100 feet off the ground, icy wind knifes through the heartiest of cold-weather gear. The flight path sent the helo in and out of weather ranging from snow to sleet to rain and back to snow. Breaking out of the fog and mist, the Pave Low approached its obscure target and the scanners "talked" the pilot down — carefully maneuvering to avoid obstacles. The landing zone was situated on a 100-foot knoll rising out of a rice paddy.

"We were on the ground only about five minutes before the medics had the patients ready to fly," said Pereira. "The initial call was for four patients, but they only loaded three. Our translator said the fourth patient had died. That added a sense of urgency–these folks were critical and all of them unconscious. Fortunately, we later learned the fourth patient's injuries weren't severe enough to warrant evacuation."

Immediately after landing, the helo was rushed by litter bearers, explained Bailey. "The scene was pretty chaotic. We had to quickly determine the extent of the injuries."

One patient was critical and two were in serious condition. The medics did a "head-to-toe" check before strapping three patients in and attending to them with oxygen and IVs. Based on the wounds, the Korean RCC requested the destination hospital change from Incheon to Seoul.

"Normally that wouldn't present a problem," explained Stepanek. "But the increased distance required us to refuel."

The Shadow crew that remained on orbit to assist the helicopter crew was ready to go when the call came in that the helo needed gas.

The Jakals of the 17th SOS are the Pacific's helo refuelers. Both the 17th and 31st Special Operations Squadrons belong to the 353rd Special Operations Group. They train together and aerial refuel regularly however, they rarely transfer gas in such foul weather.

"The conditions were terrible for refueling," said Capt. Mike Backman, a navigator with the 17th SOS. "They had solid clouds from 100 to 2,000 feet. The helo couldn't fly above 2,000 feet because the patients' head wounds wouldn't tolerate the climb, and there was risk of ice forming on the helicopter. We were lucky to find a hole in the clouds to give them gas."

"We do this all the time," said Pereira. "There wasn't a need to talk very much. We rendezvoused quickly and every aspect of the refueling became second nature. Our training paid off."

The medics in the cabin worked furiously to ration oxygen on an as-needed basis.

"We didn't have enough to keep the three patients on oxygen for the entire flight, so we supplied the most needy patient first," explained Bailey.

After gassing-up, the pilots directed the Pave Low back to the low-level route. Visibility had improved slightly so they followed Highway 1 and forged ahead to Seoul where they quickly landed and transferred patients to waiting ambulances. After flying back to Osan, the crew was relieved to have pulled off "a tough one."

"We couldn't go out and party though, because Lt. Fronk still needed his upgrade," Pereira said.

Twelve hours later, the crew was mission planning to do just that. Their heroic rescue was merely another day at the office, and the training must go on.

"The experience our crews gain here allows us to complete these sorts of missions," said Lt. Col. Brendan Clare, 31st SOS commander . "Korea is the premiere training ground for Pave crews. With its mountains, variable weather and amicable hosts, Osan provides an environment for us to achieve very high levels of crew proficiency."

Three accident victims are alive today because of the proficiency and professionalism of the 31st and 17th Special Operations Squadrons.

Body, two F-15C wreckage found

ROYAL AIR FORCE LAKENHEATH, England (AFPN) – Search and rescue teams located and identified the second missing U.S. Air Force F-15C Eagle aircraft March 28 about 400 yards from the wreckage of the first aircraft on the summit of Ben Macdui in the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland.

Royal Air Force and civilian mountain rescue teams searched to locate the aircraft and pilots.

The search for further wreckage and the remaining missing pilot, Capt. Kirk Jones continues.

Lt. Col. Kenneth Hyvonen, 40, from the 48th Operations Support Squadron, and Jones, from the 493rd Fighter Squadron here were each piloting an F-15C, when both disappeared off radar Monday over northern Scotland.

Hyvonen's remains, and the wreckage of the first F-15C were located Tuesday.

A board of U.S. Air Force officers will investigate the cause of the accident.

U.S. Air Force Photo

Search and rescue teams are looking for further wreckage from two U.S. Air Force F-15C Eagle aircraft, missing since Monday, have located the body of one pilot and the wreckage of one aircraft near Ben Macdui in the Cairngorm Mountains, Scotland.